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TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [CU](#)
SUBJECT: CUBA: 3RD AND FINAL UPDATE ON 2/24

REF: A. HAVANA 187
[1](#)B. HAVANA 201

Classified By: COM: Michael E. Parmly: For reasons 1.4 b/d

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Cubans and diplomats tell us Raul seems to be firmly in charge and Fidel's influence appears to be under control. Cubans speculate on the possibility of small economic reforms ahead with no hope for political changes. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) USINT's Refugee Unit elicited reactions about 2/24 from 70 refugee applicants during their interviews this past week. Overwhelmingly, the responses reflected a conviction that everything will remain the same and could even get worse. Consular officers interviewed repatriated migrants in eastern Havana, close to the edge of USINT's Havana limits. They found that young people born in the 1980s universally stated that the naming of Raul as president was a non-event. They saw no prospects for change, no possibility that the new government will act differently, and no change to their own lives.

[1](#)3. (C) Poloff spoke with Angolan Counselor Carlos Alberto de Figueiredo:

-- Figueiredo stated that Fidel Castro's mental state was rapidly deteriorating. He cited the comments of Angolan officials that had firsthand, albeit limited, contact with Fidel while accompanying President Dos Santos during his visit to Havana in October 2007. These officials, to include the Angolan Ambassador, reported that Fidel was unable to maintain a sustained, coherent conversation with anyone, and the meeting with Dos Santos was consequently limited to nothing more than a photo op. Based on the comments of the Angolan delegation that accompanied Dos Santos, Figueiredo assessed that Fidel had 12-18 months to live and, due to his mental state, Fidel would have little to no influence on the large scale policy decisions in Cuba. He doubted that Fidel himself was the true author of the "Reflexiones," and expressed confidence that a new PCC First Secretary would be named in the next year, replacing Fidel as Cuba's true leader.

-- Figueiredo confirmed that Machado Ventura was widely perceived as more loyal to Raul than any other official within the Cuban Regime. He assessed that this loyalty was the primary factor in Machado's appointment, as Raul considers "internal stability and preservation of the status

quo as his chief objectives in this period of transition, far more important than economic progress." Figueredo claimed Raul and the "old guard" are not trusting of Cuba's younger generation, and postulated that they would cling to power as long as they could. He opined that Raul's supposed favoring of Lage was overstated, and claimed that Perez Roque's only true ally in the regime is Fidel.

-- According to Figueredo, the GOC recently queried Angola on an oil-for-doctors/teachers deal, however, Angola had already committed all its oil to other countries. Finally, he also said that the GOC was seeking to increase the value of the Cuban peso, but claimed to have no further specifics.

¶4. (C) Poloff met with Elizardo Sanchez, head of the Cuban Commission of Human Rights and National Reconciliation:

-- Sanchez expects little change from Raul's government and was disappointed it did not show any indication of new directions. He doubts Fidel will live out another year and feels that, as long as Fidel is alive, Raul will feel constrained about taking any substantial reforms. Sanchez echoed the view that the older generation of leaders distrusts the younger generation. He said Machado is loyal to Raul, and may not necessarily be a rigid hard-liner as some have described him.

-- Sanchez prefers to "wait and see" if future appointments to the cabinet and the Political Bureau show an indication towards reform. He thinks that the government will do some minimal reforms such as beginning to increase the value of the peso, easing a few of the rules around travel, as well as home and car ownership, and allowing more farmers to own their own land. He expects that the human rights situation will not change significantly. The number of political prisoners will slowly decrease through a combination of sentence completions and few token releases at the request by other countries or institutions. The government will try to avoid new cases and, as in the past year, use short-term detentions.

¶5. (C) COM Parmly met with British Ambassador John Dew:

-- Dew was surprised by the uproar over Raul's assumption of the Cuban Presidency, as in his view nothing has really changed. When it comes to actual policy decisions, Fidel has been out of the picture for some time, a reality Dew concluded was dictated by Fidel's irrevocable health deterioration. Dew interpreted 2/24 as the formalization of the structure of power and lines of authority. Dew thought Raul would indeed "consult" his brother regularly, but not in the sense of genuinely asking for advice.

-- Dew thought Raul is in a somewhat vulnerable position, as evidenced by the sad state of the economy and the rise in popular demands for improvements in Cuban daily lives. Unlike Fidel, Raul lacks the absolute authority and must form alliances carefully.

-- Dew opined the furor over Machado's appointment was off the mark, especially the angst over him being such a "hardliner." Dew had only met Machado a few times in his four years in Havana, but he had speculated in an analytical piece to London a few weeks earlier about Machado being a good candidate for VP. His reasoning was that Machado is an inveterate workaholic, regarded as someone to be feared, and profoundly loyal -- and thus not a threat -- to Raul.

-- Dew was unsure of how quickly even minor reform steps would come. He confirmed hearing many of the same rumors about possible upcoming changes, such as: A revaluation of the Cuban peso; easing restrictions for Cubans to enter tourist hotels, to travel abroad, to buy a car, or to transfer property; allowing more private initiative on a very small scale; and introducing incentives in agriculture. He thought at least some of those steps could come fairly quickly, including within a few weeks.

¶6. (C) Econoff met with EU economic officer Jordi Carrasco and separately with EU delegation head Javier Nino. Carrasco opined that Machado will be Raul's "loyal bulldog," someone who commands everyone's respect and will faithfully, and ruthlessly, enforce Raul's agenda. Nino revealed that EU Commissioner for Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and the Caribbean Louis Michel's scheduled visit to Cuba will consist of: Arrival on Thursday, March 6; work Friday and Saturday; and departure on Sunday, March 9. According to Nino, Michel's intent was to take the current "pulse" of the situation and evaluate whether it merits furthering the dialogue. Carrasco confided that while Michel will privately exert pressure on the regime on the issue of human rights, we should not expect any public statement to that effect. Nino doubted that Michel would make a pitch specifically for the release of political prisoners during his visit. Nino reasoned, as had UK Ambassador Dew earlier, that Michel's missteps on the political prisoner issue in 2005 would make Michel more cautious this time.

¶7. (C) Comment: It seems there is an emerging consensus that the reason behind Machado being appointed as first VP, more than simply being a hard-line ideologue, is to be Raul's "chief of staff." If Raul really intends to carry out "institutional reform" within the GOC, he will need someone like Machado who is simultaneously respected and feared, and can therefore, again simultaneously, enforce possible Raul changes and take on any vested interests that might try to resist them. Cubans expectations were certainly raised about the possibility of some changes in the near term. We expect some minor changes will be made public in the following weeks, but it remains to be seen whether they will be significant. In the next two weeks, Cuba will host several high-profile visitors -- Ecuadorian President Correa, Bolivian President Morales, EU Commissioner Michel, and Mexican Foreign Minister Espinoza. The EU and Mexico will likely pressure privately on human rights but, through their public silence may actually do more than a country like Bolivia -- which will not exert any pressure on human rights whatsoever -- to promote international acceptance of Raul's GOC.

PARMLY